DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 618 EA 028 692

AUTHOR Kane, Pearl R.
TITLE Emerging Issues in K-12 Independent School Governance. AGB Occasional Paper No. 14.
INSTITUTION Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1992-00-00
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boards of Education; Demography; *Economic Factors; *Educational Administration; Educational Change; Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Private Schools; *Trustees

ABSTRACT

There are approximately 1,500 independent schools in the United States, varying widely in philosophy, organization, and style. This paper addresses changes that have developed in and around independent schools and within their boards, discusses the implications of these changes for trustees, and examines the challenges confronting independent school boards. The largest single problem confronting independent schools is the need to fill seats. Demographic change, the economic recession, and competition from public schools are all factors that affect enrollment. Another challenge is the increasingly difficult administration of independent schools, which have become complex organizations. Economic pressures have immensely complicated administration of independent schools, and a consumerist attitude on the part of parents has replaced the familial feeling that once characterized their relationship with the school. Interviews with 47 people directly and indirectly involved with the boards of independent schools indicate that there are four major issues facing independent school boards: commitment, composition, structure, and board/head relations. These findings underscore the need for trustee education. To meet these challenges, boards will need to tap the skills and knowledge of their members to the fullest. Boards will need educational plans for their own development just as they need strategic plans for their institutions. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 412 618

Association of Governing Boards
of Universities and Colleges

Emerging Issues in K-12 Independent School Governance

By Pearl R. Kane

AGB OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 14

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. Levin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EA 028692

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges publishes the Occasional Paper Series as a service to its members. Each paper focuses on current and emerging issues and trends of concern to boards and administrators in the context of their institutional settings and addresses the responsibilities of the institution's leaders and policy makers. AGB distributes new titles in the Occasional Paper Series as they are published to chief executives and board chairs of member institutions.

Permission is granted to AGB members only to photocopy all or part of each paper provided proper credit appears on each copy. Individually bound copies are available at a nominal charge by calling 1-800/356-6317 or 202/296-8400 or by writing to AGB. Multiple-copy discounts are available.

Copyright 1991 Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, One Dupont Circle, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20036. All rights reserved.

AGB

One Dupont Circle Association of
Suite 400 Governing Boards
Washington D C 20036 of Universities
202 296-8400 & Colleges

3

Emerging Issues in K-12 Independent School Governance

by Pearl R. Kane

In the good old days, life was easier for Independent School. Students felt comfortable with their classmates, whose upper-class backgrounds and religious perspectives were similar to their own. Any problems these children experienced were assuaged by a harmonious home life. Students were welcomed home each day by the aroma of freshly baked cookies and loving hugs from their mothers. In the evening, the family sat around the dinner table and shared the events of the day.

Parents were satisfied with Independent School. Even if everything was not to their liking, there was solace in knowing that attending Independent School guaranteed their child's admission to Prestigious College. School governance was less challenging, too. If Independent School found its coffers empty, the school head would summon the board of like-minded trustees to provide cash and counsel, with little controversy. The similarity in backgrounds and closely knit social circles made board interaction pleasant and familiar. Experience on other nonprofit boards made school governance easy.

Whether we find the past comforting or disconcerting, the reality of the present-day independent school is different. An observer would quickly note that the complexions of students are no longer uniform and discover that the children represent various religious groups and socioeconomic strata. Like 93 percent of the families in America, the parents of most children attending independent schools work outside the home, and many parents no longer live in the same household. Further, attending independent schools no longer ensures admission to prestigious colleges.

In the past, independent schools justified their existence as models for the public school. But they have never served as models. Independent schools have not opened their doors to public school educators, who have dismissed them as bastions of elitism. Their homogeneity and selectivity diminished their usefulness and accessibility.

Independent schools also have claimed they prepared students for leadership in government, corporations, and the professions, but the lack of diversity in the schools made it difficult to prepare students for the world in which they would assume leadership roles. Currently, independent schools are more reflective of the different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups in society, and as a

result they are becoming increasingly important as models in American education. As the schools become more relevant and influential, one might reasonably argue that the golden age of independent schools is not past; it has arrived.

This paper addresses changes that have transpired in and around independent schools and within their boards, discusses the implications of those changes for trustees, and examines the challenges confronting independent school boards and their implications for the education of independent school trustees.

THE WORLD OF THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

There are approximately 1,500 independent schools in the United States. Although the marketplace shapes independent schools, they have been relatively free to define themselves. A tremendous range of schools has evolved, varying in philosophy, organization, and style. Some schools are highly traditional, others are progressive in outlook. Some are boarding schools, some day schools, some a combination of the two. Some are single-sex, some coeducational; some are highly academic and selective, others are "second-chance" schools for students who have failed elsewhere. Some are free or inexpensive; some have sliding scales of tuition depending on family income; some have extensive scholarship programs; and some are prohibitively costly, accessible only to the affluent. Some have the stability of generations of alumni and alumnae, while others have graduated only a few classes. Some have impressive financial endowments and extensive resources in buildings and grounds, and others have recourse only to income from tuition and annual fund raising, and operate in modest or even makeshift spaces.

However varied in their objectives and approaches, all independent schools share six basic characteristics: self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students, self-selected faculty, and small size.

Though an independent school may have a religious affiliation, it is the independence of the board of trustees that distinguishes it from a parochial school, which is ultimately subordinate to a church hierarchy. The trustees choose the chief administrator, to whom are delegated all aspects of the day-to-day operation of the school. In independent schools, the absence of bureaucracy allows a more fluid organization in which the roles of administrators and teachers are less rigidly prescribed. Many administrators also teach, and many teachers do administrative work as department heads, admissions officers, or college counselors. The blurring of responsibilities between administrators and teachers may explain why most independent school teachers are not unionized.

As not-for-profit, tax-exempt corporations, independent schools rely primarily on tuition for support, supplemented by gifts from parents, alumni foundations, and corporations, and, for some, endowment income. Most independent schools are not eligible for significant financial assistance from local, state, or federal agencies. Although aid is sometimes available for books and equipment and, in many states, for transportation and mandated state services such as attendance monitoring, independent schools are cautious about accepting government subsidies because they pose a threat to self-governance.

Though free to experiment, most independent schools offer a highly academic and rigorous curriculum emphasizing English, history, languages, mathematics, and sciences. Because of the small size of most independent schools, a limited range of courses is available to students within these academic areas. This produces cohesiveness in the curriculum, but it usually eliminates the technical and vocational courses that are regular fare at public schools. The explicit curriculum has two other facets that are equally emphasized and interconnected: physical development and the overriding goal of character development. Character (or moral) development is nurtured through academics, including courses in religion and ethics that public schools cannot offer, and through an extensive program of cultural and athletic activities.

Although market conditions may cause schools to shift their standards of admission, independent schools are at liberty to select the kind of students they believe will benefit from the educational program offered. Selection is mutual: The school chooses the student, but the student also chooses the the school. This mutual freedom of association by students and schools is fundamental to the sense of community underlying the educational effectiveness of independent schools.

Each independent school develops its own criteria for hiring faculty, and, in all but a few states, independent schools are not bound by requirements for teacher certification. Independent schools show a strong preference, particularly at the secondary level, for teachers with undergraduate and graduate majors in the liberal arts and sciences, and for those who have demonstrated academic achievement by success at colleges with competitive admissions standards. Similarly, these graduates of highly academic colleges may be drawn to independent schools where students are preparing for college.

Typically small, with a median student enrollment of 318, independent schools characteristically resist going beyond a specified size, regardless of the quality of the applicant pool or the number of candidates vying for admission. There is an important consequence of small size for the "average" student. Several researchers have argued

that independent schools provide the optimal learning environment for such students, those who are neither top academic achievers nor in need of special supportive services. Smaller schools also allow for increased student participation in extracurricular activities that give students opportunities for leadership. Parents who send their children to independent schools because of the personal attention afforded their youngsters and the opportunities to participate in the life of the school appear to be getting what they pay for.

ENVIROMENTAL INFLUENCES

The largest single problem confronting independent schools is the need to fill seats. Demographic change, an economic recession, and competition from public schools are all factors that affect enrollment.

Demographic Change

A demographic decline in the number of school-age children in the population began in the early 1970s. That population trend is beginning to reverse itself, however, as a baby boomlet that started in the 1980s is now serving to increase elementary school enrollments. Despite two decades of declining student population, independent school enrollment has been relatively constant. This stability of population in the face of a declining and changing demographic pool reflects a broader outlook on the kinds of students independent schools are willing to admit.

Whether out of need or due to commitment, independent schools are now welcoming ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, and they are more receptive to students with varying abilities and learning styles. Schools are facing a new challenge as our nation is becoming increasingly diverse. Demographer Harold Hodgkinson predicts that by the year 2000, America will be a nation in which one of every three people is nonwhite.

The number of students of color in independent schools has increased slowly but steadily over the past two decades, from 5 percent to an average of 13 percent in 1991. Many of these students are recruited from lower socioeconomic groups and must rely on financial aid. Schools with greater financial resources have been able to offer the most generous scholarships. In the academic year 1990-1991, 33 percent of all need-based scholarships in independent schools were granted to children of color, averaging $5,838 per student.

Confirmation that the clientele of the so-called elite schools is changing in terms of social class origins is evident in the overall amount of scholarship aid. Total financial aid granted by schools that are members of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) increased

by 50 percent in constant dollars between 1984 and 1989. In 1990, 18 percent of all enrolled students received financial assistance, averaging $4,476 per student.

Not all nonwhite students require financial aid. Asian students now comprise the largest minority in independent schools, and Asian families appear willing and equipped to make the financial sacrifice for private school tuition. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, the number of Asians will increase dramatically over the next two decades, with important implications for independent schools. Additionally, increasing numbers of middle-class African Americans are attracted to the quality of education in independent schools.

The Influence of the Recession

The recession that began in the 1990s has hit the Northeast the hardest, the region of the country where independent schools are most heavily concentrated. Concerns about advancement issues such as annual campaigns and endowment fund raising, accelerated by a commitment and need to offer scholarship assistance, have now been replaced, in many schools, by worries about the very affordability of tuition. After ten years of increasing tuition, there is growing agreement that the ceiling has been reached. Like many colleges, independent schools will have to supplement tuition with income from other sources. This is already happening in some schools.

Independent schools are sensitive to the economy, since most parents who send their youngsters to independent schools are not independently wealthy. According to Leonard Baird, who surveyed the most prestigious schools, even students at the elite schools do not come primarily from "power elite" families, and there are not significant numbers of alumni children in the student body.

General concern about high tuition has been exacerbated by the effects of unemployment in the financial industry in many urban areas. The suddenness of layoffs in New York, for example, made it necessary for several schools to set aside funds for catastrophic aid for independent school families that find themselves unable to afford tuition. In New York City, several schools have merged, and in recent months several others have closed their doors.

Competition from Public Schools

Independent schools are beginning to look more like public schools in the diversity of their student body. In recent years, there has been an effort to organize public schools in ways that resemble independent schools. Public school reforms have emphasized reducing bureaucracy and giving parents choices among public schools that offer

different specializations such as gifted-and-talented programs or a focus on mathematics and science or the arts. Originally intended to further integration, the magnet school movement has succeeded because parents who choose their child's school are also more involved in their child's education. As the magnet school movement spreads, independent schools will be obliged to demonstrate they are sufficiently different to justify the choice of paying tuition.

If President Bush's school-reform agenda ever becomes a reality, attracting families willing to pay the high cost of independent school tuition may be more difficult. Bush's "New American Schools" program is encouraging entrepreneurial efforts to set up 535 autonomous schools, funded privately. Bush's agenda also includes a controversial voucher proposal that encompasses private schools as well as public schools. A positive reception to independent schools at the federal level could potentially erupt into a backlash by public school advocates.

Promoting independent education as an educational option may enhance independent school enrollment. A marketing study conducted by the research firm of Belden and Russonello showed that the term "independent education" has virtually no recognition value among the general public. In the study, many people misinterpreted independent education to mean progressive, permissive, or unstructured schools where students do what they please. A major public relations task remains to explain what independent education is and promote its availability and accomplishments.

According to the National Education Longitudinal Study, which began in 1988 and compares eighth-graders in public and independent schools, there is limited but increasing evidence that students who attend independent schools take more advanced courses, have higher achievement levels, and participate more in extracurricular activities compared with students who attend public schools. Quantitative data are needed to argue the case for independent schools, even though the major outcomes of the schools in developing self-esteem and character escape quantification.

THE MANAGEMENT OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Independent schools have become complex organizations that are increasingly difficult to administer. Currently, the head of an independent school has many people and functions to manage, but at the same time is expected to be a visionary leader. In a study of board-head relations conducted by Independent Education Services, one head of school summed up the expectations: A school head must have the hope of a Christian, the temperament of a stoic, and the work ethic of a Puritan.

Staff and Facilities

The roles of the admissions director and business manager, once occupied by the head of school, are now filled with specialists who talk about strategic planning, marketing, plant management, benefits packages, and staff negotiations. In the recent past, these concepts were foreign to independent schools. The increase in the number of specialists has necessarily contributed to escalating administrative costs that many parents find objectionable. Although faculty are not unionized, school heads must often negotiate with several unions for support services. All of these functions and personnel have increased the complexity of managing independent schools.

The historic buildings and spacious facilities that adorn and distinguish independent school campuses are often as costly to maintain as they are aesthetically pleasing. Many schools are struggling with upkeep or seeking multiple uses for facilities as they explore innovative ways to bring in revenues to cover the cost of maintaining and repairing facilities.

Summer programs that allow for amortizing maintenance and rentals to outside groups have increased income and complicated business management for the schools. Schools in populated areas have more access to this kind of income than those in isolated, bucolic settings. Some schools, such as Sacred Heart in New York City, which regularly rents out its beautiful facility, have been obliged to add staff to supervise the rentals.

Ancillary programs and income of this sort have a negative side. They require increased security and have raised questions in several towns about tax-exempt status. In many communities, schools are being asked to contribute to the township. Schools that have traditionally given a voluntary token contribution are now being asked to accept a larger share of the financial burden of local government.

Faculty

Demands for higher salaries and increased benefits for teachers, buoyed by significant increases in the public sector, are supported by the administration in most independent schools. School heads recognize that teachers are the most significant element in their school's success, and attracting and retaining excellent teachers is an important priority. Since 80 percent of the instructional budget of most independent schools is devoted to teacher salaries, increases have come slowly but steadily over the past decade and are in line with the school's financial situation. When enrollment is a major problem, teacher salaries may be frozen, but the administration understands the negative effect on morale and mobility.

Alternate routes to certification for public school teaching and reduced certification requirements in many states have made it possible for independent school teachers to secure jobs in public schools. "Teachers in Public and Independent Schools," a 1985 study of teachers in New Jersey, found that two-thirds of the independent school teachers were not certified. In the past, these teachers were ineligible for jobs in public schools, but in an attempt to attract high-caliber, well-educated people with a background in the liberal arts to teaching, several states have made it possible to earn certification on the job.

With average salaries approximately 20 percent higher in public schools, the incentive may be irresistible to some independent school teachers. The New Jersey study found that loyalty to independent school teaching is weak, possibly because teachers are not familiar with conditions in public schools. Two out of three independent school teachers said they would consider working in a public school if they were looking for a job now. Recent developments to improve working conditions in public schools and give teachers classroom autonomy may provide further incentive for some to make the move.

Independent School Parents

Most parents of independent school students have not chosen the school because attending private school is a cherished family tradition. They have left the public schools for specific reasons. What attracts them to independent schools are the quality of the academic program, personalized attention, responsiveness to parental requests, and ultimately admission to a competitive college. As one head of school observed, "We exist in an environment in which people expect independent schools to provide the very best because that's what we sell. People who are paying tuition don't want to hear that they are getting second best." In a sense, tuition costs are regarded as payment for a service; trustees and heads of schools tell us parents are not reluctant to demand that service or to take legal action when they feel an injustice has been done to their child.

The consumerist attitude toward independent schools has replaced the familial feeling that once characterized the relationship. Being a customer rather than an extension of a family provides a sense of removal that makes litigiousness as likely in independent schools as in other American institutions. It also results in special demands on the schools to accommodate dual-career and single-parent families. High on the list of demands are "convenience" services such as after-school programs and extended day care. To increase their appeal to working parents, some schools have been pressed to provide these services. Additionally, since parental responsibilities are often shared in

dual-career families, both parents have less time available to give the school, as either occasional volunteers or board members.

Because middle- and upper-middle-income families work hard for their money, some resent the funds doled out in the form of scholarship aid. In some schools, financial aid comes directly from tuition and families that struggle financially may not be enthusiastic about subsidizing the tuition of other students. Nor do all parents welcome diversity. Some parents have chosen to leave the public schools for private schools where shared values and backgrounds make child rearing a less threatening prospect. These are the attitudes and behaviors often associated with the "baby boomer" generation, and these same parents sit on the boards of independent schools.

CHALLENGES TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BOARDS

To gather information for the following sections on the emerging needs of independent schools, interviews were conducted with forty-seven people directly and indirectly involved with boards, including trustees, board chairs, heads of schools, and consultants. We also sought information from individuals and organizations that deal with trustees and trustee education and surveyed the literature on nonprofit boards.

Just as there is nostalgia for the independent schools of the past, there is a longing for the trustees of yesteryear, who gave much and demanded little. In John McPhee's The Headmaster, the story of Frank Boyden, who ruled Deerfield Academy for sixty-six years, the school's trustees had a clear role. They showed up with their checkbooks when summoned. The trustees gave money and unquestioned authority over school governance to their charismatic headmaster.

Times have changed. An environment hostile to the survival of independent schools and increased pressures from constituencies within make the job of overseeing schools more demanding. Even the division of labor that once characterized school board composition -- work, wisdom, or wealth -- is no longer feasible to meet the challenges confronting many schools today. Schools need money, but money alone will not guarantee survival or ensure that the school is worth supporting. Boards need members who have money or access to money, but they also need a majority of people who are intelligent and thoughtful, who care deeply about the school and its survival, and who are willing to devote time and energy to the complex tasks of overseeing the school.

Although the role and prestige of trustees vary with the size and resources of an institution, there appears to be consensus on the issues confronting independent school boards. Four major areas of concern emerged from our interviews: commitment, composition, structure, and

board/head relations.

Commitment

Boards are being called on to play a more active role in the governance of their schools. Often, trustees are lured onto the board with a promise that the job will require minimal time, with the frequency of meetings cited as an index of the time commitment. Members quickly discover that the work of the board is accomplished by committees or individuals in between monthly or bimonthly meetings. Many are not prepared to make the time commitment required to deal with increased fiduciary problems, enrollment concerns, and legal matters.

James Ledyard's study of boards indicates that the average time trustees spend on school affairs is ten or eleven hours per month, an increase of 35 percent over similar studies conducted ten years earlier, as reported by Otto Kraushaar. Our interviewees tell us that boards need their members to devote more time and attention to trustee matters than they are prepared to give. The largest representation on boards is parents of current students, and most are dual-career families. Many share child-rearing responsibilities and are reluctant to compromise their schedules.

Composition

Boards function smoothly when members have similar backgrounds and travel in the same social circles. It is hardly surprising that homogeneous boards perpetuate themselves. They nominate new members from the pool of people they know, those with whom they interact and feel comfortable. These status-congruent boards are likely to approve or disapprove decisions with unanimous votes and to have few disagreements.

Smooth sailing is convenient and pleasant, and perhaps efficient, but it is no measure of board effectiveness. There is some evidence that boards with high levels of interaction and communication with school constituents may have more stable leadership patterns and may be more effective in making decisions than homogeneous boards. In recent years, the composition of boards has changed to reflect the changing nature of the parent body and deliberate efforts are being made to recruit more women and people of color. The growing diversity of trustees may ultimately result in more interaction and more effective board performance, but it will also make the management of the board more difficult.

Trustees and school heads interviewed for this study agreed that a predominance of board members who are parents, inexperienced with independent schools and unfamiliar with

the concept of trusteeship, influences the tenor of the board in negative ways. Many parents on boards attended public schools themselves and are not steeped in the culture or traditions of independent education, nor are they accustomed to working on boards. Labeled "first-generation independent school trustees," these newcomers to independent schools often fail to understand a critical aspect of their role, which is to serve as advocates externally and informants internally, a role described in the literature on nonprofit organizations as "boundary spanning." As boundary spanners, trustees are expected to buffer the school from interference by parents by addressing criticisms informally, but they must keep the board connected to the school community so that the board may respond to information and criticism appropriately.

The preponderance of current school parents on boards, particularly in day schools, distinguishes independent school boards from other nonprofit organizations and often creates another major obstacle to effective board performance. Even experienced trustees may relinquish a sense of corporate responsibility and behave out of self-interest when the matter at hand has implications for their own child. Parents can become champions of single issues that divert and disrupt board proceedings.

Such parents chose the private school over the local public school, but are not necessarily committed to independent education. They often have a passion for one aspect of school life that may not be entirely satisfied in the chosen school or that may cloud their judgment as trustees, as they attempt to satisfy an immediate and specific interest for their child. Programs for learning disabled youngsters or the organization of a special sports team are examples of such issues.

One school head provided an illustrative anecdote. The school had a strong football team, but did not pay sufficient attention to the overall physical education program. When the faculty decided to introduce a boys' volleyball team, it upset several trustees who were parents of football players. They were convinced that volleyball would attract prospective football players and ultimately destroy the school's winning football record. Single-issue trustees may persist in imposing their agenda on the board even when resources are limited and their objectives are short-sighted.

Team skills are necessary, particularly for board members who bring different perspectives to the work of the board, but they are often lacking even among accomplished and prominent people. Trustees, who may be successful in individual practice as doctors or entrepreneurs or investment bankers, for example, may be adept at working alone. Others who lack corporate or business experience may not know how to be team players. However highly skilled and personable in their own right, without specific training these individuals may impede the group process.

Generally, building a strong board has become an arduous task. Staffing a board is analogous to staffing any organization. It requires careful planning and recruitment of people with a range of technical skills and other kinds of expertise, but increasingly boards must compete for talent. Corporate people with professional skills in financial management are in demand, and they are being tapped for high-visibility public service boards such as those of art museums and hospitals. People who are recruited for their wealth may have little interest in doing the work of the board. If contributions are a primary motivation for recruitment, the board may lack the range of skills needed.

There is growing recognition that building boards is an ongoing task that can not be accomplished in a once-a-year scramble to find prospective members. With respect to recruitment, several lessons from higher education boards are beginning to influence independent school boards. Many boards have added a committee on trustees, for example, which performs several functions, including board and school head evaluation, orientation of new members, and year-round recruitment. A second procedure borrowed from college governing boards is the institution of donors' councils, which meet annually to receive a briefing on the school's progress, a potential alternative to filling places on the board with people who are recruited mainly for their wealth.

The move toward diversity in the schools is beginning to be reflected in board composition, and there is wider acceptance of women, particularly in northern urban areas and in California. Schools actively recruiting children of color to their ranks will be wise to recruit people of color to their boards. Board composition makes an important statement about the seriousness of the commitment to diversity. Necessarily, women and people of color will bring perspectives different from those of the like-minded people who governed schools in previous decades. Like their newly arrived colleagues from outside traditional independent school circles, they will make decision making more difficult.

The popular management writer Peter Drucker believes that good decision making requires dissent. Different factions on a board can be a vehicle for promoting mutual understanding and more informed decision making. Schools have an obligation to provide new recruits with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to handle their roles and responsibilities deftly. The increasing diversity of the independent school board may be its greatest asset.

Structure

Many questions about the organization of boards emerged in the materials reviewed for this study and in discussions with trustees and board chairs. Board committees, monitoring

and feedback procedures, faculty representation, and terms of office were topics that occupied conversations. Although the work of boards is accomplished mainly through committees, merely appointing committees does not ensure that they will function effectively. Nor is it always clear that standard committees should exist in every school. Committee chairs need guidance on how to run their committees and how to communicate with the board president.

According to James Ledyard's study of independent day school boards, approximately one-fourth have faculty representation. Some faculty representatives vote; others are appointed ex-officio. The Trustee Handbook published by NAIS indicates that approximately 15 percent of all member schools, day and boarding, have faculty serving as full trustees and an additional 38 percent have faculty observers at board meetings. Information on the advantages and drawbacks of faculty involvement would be useful to boards.

Ledyard found that approximately a quarter of all boards evaluate their own performance and about half evaluate the head of the school. Less than a third provide a written evaluation. Everyone consulted for this study remarked on the importance of a written evaluation for the board as a whole, individual board members, and the head of school. There are several handbooks that advise boards on conducting such evaluations, but boards and board chairs do not appear to turn to the literature on school governance to improve or inform their operations. They seem to prefer the advice of consultants or the experience of other boards, but limited finances have made some boards reluctant to hire consultants.

Other structural issues can evolve in response to a specific problem or as a result of unexamined tradition. For example, a policy change aimed at getting rid of a particular board member, without full consideration of the long-term effects of the policy, can leave the board with a dysfunctional rotation policy that is difficult to change. Similarly, the creation of "first- and second-class citizens" within boards may arise from insensitivity on the part of the board chair or the continuation of long-established procedures without consideration of their consequences. When the board chair asks the executive committee to remain at the end of a meeting, for example, those not involved feel unimportant. Individuals who are recruited because they are high achievers in their own right want to feel competent and effective as board members. They can become alienated when their expertise is not tapped or if they feel they are not making a meaningful contribution.

These examples illustrate that boards would benefit from learning about optimal ways to structure their work and manage people. Clearly, managing a board requires special skills. In his book Boards That Make a Difference, John Carver concluded that board difficulties stem from board design, observing that poor design is the reason most boards

function as incompetent groups of competent people. Recent articles on board committee structure recommend following the lead of colleges by instituting a committee on trustees, a trustee education committee of sorts, to oversee the important functions of nominating new members, board evaluation, orientation for new members, and continuing education for veteran trustees.

Board/Head Relations

In his dissertation on board/head relations, headmaster James Scott describes the creative tension that exists between the board and the school head: The head is employed by the board and answerable to it, but the board also looks to the head for leadership and direction. The board is responsible for setting policy, but the school head usually guides the board in developing policy. In Private School Boards and Heads, William McMillan posits a larger role for the school head. McMillan observes that the school head's role is to initiate policy; the trustee's role, to evaluate and respond. In essence, McMillan views the board as an arm of management rather than an overseer of management, a model that seems unlikely to take hold in the economic climate of the 1990s.

In the Independent Sector's publication "Governance is Governance," Kenneth Dayton argues that governance is the distinct province of the board, and management is the exclusive province of the chief executive officer. In most independent schools, neither a clear-cut division of responsibilities nor a policy-setting role for the school head is feasible or desirable. More typically, authority is shared, but school heads understand that working with their board is an essential part of the job, often occupying 25 percent of their time. Newly appointed heads are often surprised to discover the time, effort, and skill required to work with boards.

Search consultant James Wickenden surveyed 190 school heads to identify the skills necessary for successful headships. Head/board chair relations were ranked the highest, and head/trustee relations in general were ranked third. Most school heads are not trained to deal with boards and boards are not trained to give heads the kind of support that will ensure that they want to remain on the job. The NAIS 1991 survey of board chairs indicated that in approximately 60 percent of the schools studied the heads had no prior experience as heads of schools, and few have business or legal backgrounds or the kind of professional education that prepares them for the political realities of the job.

As Linda Gibbs, director of NAIS administrative services observed, neophytes require greater support from the board, but are less apt to get it at a time when boards are

experiencing financial pressures and are more bottom-line oriented. According to the NAIS 1991 survey, there may be a deterioration of board/head relations because boards expect heads of schools to have skills in finance and strategic planning, areas in which school heads say they have limited expertise.

The perception that the tender relationship between boards and heads is breaking down is fueled by the widespread belief that "Saturday night massacres," the sudden dismissal or forced resignation of heads, are occurring with increasing frequency. Empirical evidence on the causes of job termination is hard to find, but there appears to be a correspondence between the sudden dismissal of a newly appointed head and a change in the board chair. In sum, the explanations offered for sudden dismissals include a number of problems related to school governance:

* Boards are business oriented and demand bottom-line accountability.

* The fragility of the board/head relationship is a function of a softening enrollment market.

* School heads are unable to fulfill the mission of a high-profile college admissions record when they are attracting students of lower ability.

* There is a direct correlation between the rotation of the board chair and the tenure of the school's head, particularly with new heads of schools.

* Inadequate communication, both formal and informal, is the source of most problems.

Filling a vacant headship is disruptive to school life and expensive in human and financial resources. The recruitment process is an added burden to a school having problems already, but schools experiencing difficulty may be the most likely to displace the school head. Most schools employ a search firm or search consultant to aid in the head search process, adding to the in-house cost. Nancy Henningsen's 1991 survey of eleven major search firms indicated that most charge $25,000 to $30,000 per search, and some firms charge as much as $50,000 to $80,000. With the financial burden of paying off an employment contract and hours of faculty and board time devoted to the search, the energy of a school may be misdirected. More care must be exercised in fostering good board/head relations, since the consequences of a breakdown in this crucial relationship can be dire for both the school head and the board.

Already there are signs that fewer independent school educators are seeking top administrative posts. In

Henningsen's survey, head search consultants reported a diminished pool of traditional applicants for headship positions, although an increase in candidates who are women, minorities, college faculty, and public school administrators has taken up the slack.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory study of independent school boards points to changes in the environments of the schools and to new challenges and opportunities facing their governing boards. It underscores the need for trustee education for boards of independent schools.

To confront these challenges, boards will need to tap the skills and knowledge of their members to the fullest. For many boards, this will require learning to work better together to maximize their collective strength, as well as an effort to increase the skills of individual members. Boards that have not been tested in recent years may find that financial difficulties and the conditions of the marketplace will force them to get their houses in order. One school head in the south claimed that the recession has had a positive effect: "We had to work together to become a better school. You get sloppy when you don't have to win people over, sloppy in financial management and wasteful in opportunity. Our board and our school emerged stronger."

Board effectiveness will be pivotal in determining which schools improve. Indeed, wise action on the part of the board will determine which schools survive. Given the magnitude of the task confronting independent schools, the absence of a systematic plan for trustee education within boards appears to be a major limitation. This study shows that board members need education in how to be effective trustees, highlighting the special characteristics of independent school boards that must be considered in developing any educational effort. But the study also reveals an incongruity: Neither the boards nor their individual members are predisposed to the notion of trustee education.

Trustee education requires a systematic approach that can be handled by a combination of internal and external resources. Out of approximately 15,000 trustees whose schools are members of the National Association of Independent Schools, it is estimated that 3,000 to 4,000 are new each year. New members need to be oriented to their responsibilities and to the organizations they hold in trust.

Boards as a whole need educational plans for their own development, just as they need strategic plans for their institutions. The educational plan may include team building, fund raising, evaluation, and recruitment skills, as well as information about various aspects of school life and independent education in a broader social context. Board chairs require special training in conducting meetings, board

design, monitoring performance of committee chairs, and working in tandem with the head of school.

Independent school boards are unlike other nonprofit boards. They are composed largely of parents, who have daily contact with the school and serve overlapping roles as trustees and constituents of the school. The administrative structure of independent schools is more collegial than hierarchical. Since administrators teach and teachers often serve in administrative roles, the school head operates in a context different from that of most organizations. Additionally, the relationship between the school head and the board is not characteristic of other nonprofit organizations. The board chair depends on the head for expertise and information. Even trustees who have experience on other nonprofit boards may find independent school governance more demanding.

There are barriers that stand in the way of giving trustees the kind of education they need; the most significant is getting people to the gate. The unwritten contract that trustees adopt when they commit themselves to boards does not usually include spending time on self-development or investing in the social skills of team building. The challenge now is to persuade trustees of their need for education and to make them aware of the availability of educational resources.

Special thanks to Sarah Gillman and David Hochschartner for their research assistance.

Emerging Issues in K-12 Independent School Governance

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Pearl Rock Kane is assistant professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she directs the Esther A. and Joseph Klingenstein Center for Independent School Education. She has published numerous articles on independent schools in the Phi Delta Kappan, Independent School, and Education Week, and is the editor of two books, The First Year of Teaching: Real World Stories from America's Teachers (1991) and Independent Schools, Independent Thinkers (1992).